

An interview with Carl Dix

Edward Remus

Last May, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a conversation on the campus of the University of Chicago between Carl Dix of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, and Cornel West, a veteran member of the Democratic Socialists of America, the co-author of The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto (2012), and Professor of Philosophy and Christian Practice at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. Edward Remus circled back to that conversation in a July 3, 2012 interview with Carl Dix on the radio show Radical Minds on WHPK (88.5 FM) with an eye on the upcoming U.S. elections. What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.

Edward Remus: You helped to found the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) at a moment when there was a renewed interest in Maoism in the United States. What attracted you to Maoism at that moment and what led you to join the Black Workers’ Congress? How did your political development then lead you to the RCP?

Carl Dix: I grew up in the United States during the 1960s, when the biggest things going on in this country (and contributing to larger developments in the world) were the U.S. war in Vietnam and the brutal oppression of black people in the U.S. But at the same time, as I came of age, there was resistance on both of these fronts. As a black man, what was being done to black people—but also the heroic resistance that black people were waging—was very impactful and inspiring for me. Also, I got drafted into the army, which posed the question of going to Vietnam. Those two things came together for me.

I decided that the Vietnam War was a war I could not fight and I was sent to Leavenworth Military Penitentiary. I spent a few years there, and during that time I paid as much attention as I could to the continuing resistance against the wars being waged by the U.S. and against the oppression of black people.

I soon came up against the Soviet Union, because the Soviet Union didn’t strike me as a radically new or different society compared to the U.S. But China had made a revolution a few decades before and was then in the middle of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Here the revolutionaries, led by Mao Tse-Tung, were

saying, “Bombard the Headquarters!,” calling on the workers, peasants, and students to raise their heads, to criticize, and even to resist the ruling Communist Party who had turned down the capitalist road. That posed to me the possibility of building society on a different basis. It wasn’t just a question of getting a different group of people in power and hoping they would do good by you. You could actually cause a rupture. That’s how I became a Maoist.

ER: When you look back on the period of the 1960s, do things look different to you now than they did then? Would you revisit your approach in any way?

CD: When I joined the revolutionary movement—I was a founding member of the RCP in 1975—I kind of expected revolution to happen the day after tomorrow. I have to revisit that from the perspective of understanding the history of revolution, how it has developed, what it is going up against, and the kind of situation required for it to have a shot to win. I have come to understand that you can’t make revolution in an advanced, imperialist country like this whenever you want, that there has to develop a revolutionary situation, which didn’t come to full fruition in the 1960s and definitely is not the case now. But I still view revolution as what is needed, as the way to deal with all the problems that humanity faces, and that our basic thrust of a Maoist approach to that revolution was correct.

ER: How does the task of revolution relate to the RCP’s current strategic thinking? By most accounts, the RCP is the second-largest Marxist organization in the United States today, and its presence is felt on campus. What is the rationale behind the ongoing series of discussions between you and Cornel West, including the one recently held here on the campus of the University of Chicago? How does this engagement fit within the RCP’s larger strategy? How do these engagements express the strategy of the RCP at present, and what motivates the RCP’s orientation towards campuses, students, and intellectuals?

CD: Our strategic orientation can be encapsulated in saying that everything we do comes from the perspec-

tive of building a movement for revolution. In particular, the idea of revolution has been subjected to an ideological counter-offensive by the capitalist rulers, especially after the overthrow of revolutionary rule in China and the collapse of the Soviet Union a decade and a half later. When it collapsed in 1991, the Soviet Union was no longer a revolutionary country, but one where capitalism had been restored decades earlier. Since then the example of the Soviet Union has been primarily cited to argue that revolution is impossible, that revolutions lead to disaster, and that there is no better society than this capitalist world that we live in.

Going up against that has a couple of key aspects, one being that we have to spread the idea that the world does not have to be this way, that society could be organized differently, and that it will take a communist revolution to do that. People were being hit, coming off the 2008 elections, with the idea that a watershed had been passed, we were in a post-racial society, that the oppression of black people happened but that was in the past. We felt that we had to address that question. Cornel also wanted to address it. He had gone from being a critical supporter of Obama to being one of his most prominent progressive critics. The RCP wants to engage with others who are talking about these things. That was why we spoke to Alain Badiou in the journal *Demarcations*, and we’ll be speaking to Žižek’s work in an upcoming issue. It is also why we produced the draft of the *Constitution For The New Socialist Republic In North America*, because we wanted to show people that there is another way that this society could be organized.

ER: What motivates the RCP’s orientation towards campuses, students, and intellectuals? For presumably all of these issues could be pitched to labor unions, urban communities, professionals, or any particular social demographic. But how do you assess the merits of this campus-based focus on students?

CD: In terms of the work on campus, we are going after the youth, and we are going to the youth because our assessment of how revolutionary movements have developed is that, historically, youth from various classes and strata have played a key role; the youth is not yet locked into society. They are more open to looking at what is right and what is wrong and seeing the difference between current reality and the way things could be. We saw that in the 1960s; even the Black Panther Party of the 1960s was formed on college campuses. So that is what we are doing, and as far as the effectiveness, we do go well beyond that.

We think that the communist movement worldwide is hanging by a thread. It has to do with the ideological counter-offensive of the capitalist class, but there is also a crisis within the communist movement, where a lot of communists, including a lot of Maoists, feel that all we have to do is hang on to what Mao came up with, and that if we do that, we can keep going forward. And

that is wrong on two counts: The first count is that Maoism was a development of the science of revolution that Marx and Lenin before him had forged, and any science has to be approached not as a dead set of dogma but as a guide for practice; in this case, practice to change the world.

Second, we have to look at the application of Maoism to changing the world and what was proven correct in that application, but also to identify what its shortcomings and errors were. Then you have to break with those errors, not carry them forward, since the world you are trying to change is not the same world that Mao was working on. And that’s the importance of the work of Bob Avakian. He is not just saying, “We’re for revolution, so the previous revolutions were good, and that is the end of the discussion.” He is rather saying, “Let’s look at what they were correct on and what they did well, but also where they fell short, what the errors were, and how we can break with those errors.”

We have to fight what we call a “cultural revolution within the communist movement” over those approaches. We think that, on one hand, there’s a crisis situation in the communist movement internationally, and on the other hand, imperialism is bringing forward people who want to resist it, and we have to show people that the way to get out from under that system is indeed still revolution and communism.



Carl Dix, being arrested at Occupy New York.

ER: So what accounts for the decline of the Left in the 20th century? Beyond the dogmatization of Maoism, how do you see the Left itself as potentially bound up with a kind of self-defeat or failure in the 20th century?

CD: We think that the central problem is that people cannot even imagine their way beyond this setup. When the Occupy movement developed, Avakian talked about its importance in changing the terms of the debate and

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I support the President against white supremacist attacks against him or his precious family. But I return to Martin Luther King Jr.’s criteria—poverty, militarism, xenophobia, and materialism. I try to build on them and therefore I have ended up being a strong critic of the system the President heads.



WL: To take up some of the themes of your discussion with Carl Dix on this campus: Millions of Americans languish in jail as we speak and when they get out, few will rejoin society. Public education is poor, and even a high school diploma or college degree is not leading people to good jobs. The military seems the last refuge of the American welfare state. How are endemic joblessness, mass incarceration, militarism, and the education crisis linked? What does it mean politically that Americans trust one or the other party of Wall Street to lead them out of this crisis?

CW: We have got to be able to begin to see the inter-connection between Wall Street, the military industrial complex, the corporate media multiplex which turns its back on poor people by downplaying the plight of working people, which talks about the “middle class” as if that is the only sector of the population worth talking about, and which refuses to engage the tremendous power and wealth of oligarchs and plutocrats both on Wall Street as well as in corporate America. Making these connections is very difficult, connections between the hyper-incarceration, Depression-like unemployment and underemployment rates, low quality housing, low quality schools, etc. And we end up with fellow citizens who are suffering, in deep pain, but not exposed to any alternative analysis or alternative views of the world so that they often times fall back into their sleepwalking despite their wounds, their bruises, and their scars. But right now they are awakening. What brother Carl Dix and I were talking about is a fundamental awakening around the issues of poverty, mass incarceration, and unemployment.

WL: How do you understand the relation between racism and capitalism in America?

CW: You have to tell a historical story of how it came to be that capitalism was generating such tremendous wealth in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries based in the New World very much on black and slave labor. For the first 300 years, five Africans came to the New World for every one European. Those five Africans were there

primarily to be used as commodities to make the wealth in the cotton fields, sugar fields, and rice fields of the plantations. So, at the very beginning, you have slavery as a fundamental pillar, if not the fundamental pillar, of capitalism taking off in the New World. White supremacy became, of course, the major justification, rationalization, or ideology to justify that kind of dehumanized treatment of Africans. Indigenous peoples were already here and we know the original sin of the European explorers was their interaction with indigenous people that lead to genocidal attacks and assaults, spreading diseases, and so on. But the American Indians did not become the basis of the economy. It was primarily the African slaves who served as the basis of the economy. So we are dealing with this legacy, and the history becomes very important. That is why Carl Dix and I always talk about how you have got to look backward to get a sense of where you have been before you look forward. We have to allow the best of the past to stand at our back in our fight back against injustice to make the world a better place and the future different than the present.

SL: With the struggle of the abolitionists against slavery ultimately culminating in the Civil War in the 19th century and then again in 1920s and 1930s with the campaigns of the Communist Party, the history of the American left and the struggle to overcome racism are intimately bound together. The same can be said of the Civil Rights Movement in the 20th century. How do you think that that is changing? I don’t want to affirm the idea that racism has come to an end in the United States, but surely it has changed. Also, in some ways that legacy has become an obstacle inasmuch as people lack a vocabulary for talking about injustice except as racism. Is racism a category we know how to use adequately anymore?

CW: Absolutely. During slavery, of course, the language of racism was primarily one of white supremacist enslavement of black people. Then you break the back of slavery, and here comes slavery by another name, it’s called Jim Crow and Jane Crow, American terrorism. That was the case up until the 1960s. We broke the back of Jim Crow, but since then a new Jim Crow has begun to emerge in a very intense way. The prison industrial complex is tied to poverty, the transformation of neighborhoods into ghettos and “hoods” from which the middle class has escaped. And yet we continue to use the language of racism as if it were still tied to the old Jim Crow, which was a matter of citizens’ rights and of the vote, a matter of gaining access to public space with dignity. But now it is a question of dealing with race as tied to issues of economic injustice and class, and dealing with gender in the plight of women and children. If we use the language of the old Jim Crow, we are primarily talking about voting, if you’re talking about the new Jim Crow we’re talking about prisons and this must lead to discussing structures and institutions in our economy, in our community, and in the mass media. The media today does not even allow us to raise the issue of all the suffering tied to prisons and police brutality. Why? Because we are citizens. Of course one can

raise the question: But those who go through the new Jim Crow, are they citizens? Can felons vote? In most cases, no. Can felons get access to jobs and housing? In many states, no. So we need a new language of talking about racism that is not tied to the old Jim Crow. Martin Luther King Jr., Freddy Hampton, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Dorothy Day, Philip Berrigan, they broke the back of the old Jim Crow. That was progress. But here comes a new Jim Crow in the same way the old Jim Crow came right after slavery.

WL: In your interview on Big Think, you spoke of the 1970s and 1980s as a time when the majority of intellectuals embraced neoliberalism while you, Michael Harrington, and Stanley Aronowitz were still reading Lukács. Lukács and the Marxist tradition more generally are absent from intellectual life today. What has happened on the Left to occasion the intellectual bankruptcy of the present? What blocks the intellectual recovery of the history and legacy of the Left? In this context, how do you understand your role in publicly debating Carl Dix on U.S. campuses and in inviting Bob Avakian of the RCP on to a nationally syndicated radio show?

CW: The marginalizing of dissenting voices has gotten worse. When I was coming along in the 1960s and 1970s, we had Noam Chomsky, William Appleman Williams, Philip Foner, Herbert Aptheker, Angela Davis, Herbert Marcuse, and we could go on and on and on. We have a number of voices these days, but there is not a lot of exposure to the traditions of critique, be they socialist, communist, anarchist, or whatever. Even G.K. Chesterton’s distributism, which is very critical of capitalism as a system, is hardly heard these days. Yet it is something very needed because we are at such a level of crisis. I do not actually believe that any school of thought has a monopoly on truth. When I say I am a deep democrat and revolutionary Christian that means that I try not to be rigid and dogmatic when it comes to analysis. I like to be flexible and fluid. I am looking for all different kinds of intellectual, moral, and spiritual weaponry in order to fight for justice.

It is necessary that we get a variety of voices including those who have direct systemic critiques of capitalism. And of course Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* already talked about everything for sale, everybody for sale, ubiquitous commodification, which meant that it is all about the market, all human value reduced to the market price. In 1923 he is talking about this. Almost 100 years later we see what we was talking about in very concrete terms before our very eyes. In a society in which everybody is for sale it is very difficult to sustain our integrity and our concern for the truth, especially the truth about injustice. So you end up with intellectuals and academicians who are basically up for sale. They will sell out in a minute. They will sell out to the right: It could be the Heritage Foundation or any other institution. They will sell out to the center, or, say the neoliberal MSNBC.

It is a matter of simply trying to be honest and saying, “You know what, if we are going to tell the truth about suffering in our society and in our world, then we are going to have to have a systemic critique of capitalism

and imperialism that does not turn away from drones dropped down on innocent people, that does not turn away from the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the Chinese occupation of Tibet, or the Moroccan occupation of the Western Sahara.” It is a matter of being honest, bold, and fearless. When the market is so pervasive and people are selling out to the highest bidder then the issues of integrity, truth, boldness, and fearlessness collapse. This is what we have seen in the academy among so many intellectuals.

SL: In your generation there was an intellectual left that came to occupy the American university system. How is the landscape being reshaped for the new generation of would-be leftist intellectuals?

CW: It is hard to say. I just spent some wonderful time the other night with Black Agenda Report. They had a big fundraiser at the Riverside Church. These are important intellectuals with courageous visions and voices, none of whom or very few of whom are in the academy. Still, when I think of new spaces, what will be the lines of socialization for new thinkers and intellectuals, I think it’s going to be so complicated in the next five to fifteen years. It may come through film, may come through hip-hop. There might be a hip-hop renaissance around Lupe Fiasco, Brother Ali, and others that brings new voices in by exposing them to alternative analyses and alternative visions, and the quest for alternatives to this nightmarish world in which we find ourselves. But it is very hard to project, it really is, just like it’s hard to project what the catalyst for the next social movement will be.

SL: In 2010 we celebrated the 150th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s election to the White House and we are now swiftly approaching the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Americans when polled still rank Lincoln as the greatest president in the country’s history. What does it say about American democracy that Americans view as their greatest elected official a man whose election was most inextricably bound up with the country’s descent into civil war? While of course no one wants violent social conflict, what sort of democratic conflict is needed in America today? What are some of the divisions in this society that political leadership needs to pry open today?

CW: Lincoln emerged at a moment of intense political polarization. The very fact that most Americans view him as the greatest president gives you some sense of the degree to which the issues of both race, capitalism, and class still sit at the center of American life. Lincoln was dealing with levels of poverty, dealing with levels of racial domination, and dealing with a highly polarized public life. As we know, he could not hold it together, and it collapsed into a violent insurrection to overthrow the U.S. called for by the Confederacy. You saw some courageous things on Lincoln’s part in terms of trying to listen to Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass and to respond to the abolitionist social movement. Lin-

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Class consciousness (from a Marxist perspective) today

Chris Cutrone

FOR MARXISTS, the division of modern socioeconomic classes is not the *cause* of the problem of capitalism but rather its *effect*.

Modern classes are different from ancient separations between castes, such as between the clergy or priestly caste, and the noble aristocracy or warrior caste, and the vast majority of people, “commoners,” or those who were ignorant of divinity and without honor, who, for most of history, were peasants living through subsistence agriculture, a mute background of the pageantry of the ancient world.

Modern, “bourgeois” society, or the society of the modern city, is the product of the revolt of the Third Estate, or commoners, who had no property other than that of their labor: “self-made” men. During the French Revolution, the Third Estate separated itself from the other Estates of the clergy and aristocracy, and declared itself the National Assembly, with the famous Tennis Court Oath. This fulfilled the call of the Abbé Sieyès, who had declared in his revolutionary pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?*, that while under the *ancien régime* the Third Estate had been “nothing,” now it would be “everything.”

As the 20th century Marxist Critical Theorist Theodor Adorno put it, “society is a concept of the Third Estate.” What he meant by this was that unlike the previous, ancient civilization in which people were divinely ordered in a Great Chain of Being, the Third Estate put forward the idea that people would *relate* to one another. They would do so on the basis of their “work,” or their activity in society, which would find purchase not in a strict hierarchy of traditional values, but rather through a “free market” of goods. People would be free to find their own values in society.

Modern society is thus the society of the Third Estate, after the overthrow of the traditional authority of the Church and the feudal aristocrats. Modern, bourgeois society is based on the values of the Third Estate, which center on the values of work. The highest values of modern society are not religion or the honor of a warrior code, but rather material productivity and efficiency, being a “productive member of society.” From this per-

spective, the perspective of modern bourgeois society, all of history appears to be the history of different, progressively developing “modes of production,” of which capitalism is the latest and highest. The past becomes a time of people toiling in ignorance and superstition, held back by conservative customs and arrogant elites from realizing their potential productivity and ingenuity. The paradigmatic image of this state of affairs is Galileo being forced to recant his scientific insight under threat by the Church.

With the successful revolt of the Third Estate it appeared that humanity attained its “natural” condition of Enlightenment, in relation both to the natural world and in humans’ relations with each other. Seemingly unlimited possibilities opened up, and the Dark Ages were finally brought to an end.

With the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th to early 19th centuries, however, a new “contradiction” developed in bourgeois society, that of the value of *capital* versus the value of the wages of *labor*. With this contradiction came a new social and political conflict, the “class struggle” of the workers for the value of their wages against the capitalists’ imperative to preserve and expand the value of capital. This came to a certain head in the 1840s, known at the time as the “hungry ’40s,” the first world-wide economic crisis after the Industrial Revolution, which seemed to go beyond a mere adjustment of the market, but pointed to new and deeper problems.

This new conflict between the workers and capitalists that raged in the mid-19th century was expressed in the desire for “socialism,” of society becoming true to itself, and the value of the contributions of all society’s members being recognized and their being allowed to participate fully in the development and political direction of humanity. This was expressed in the Revolutions of 1848, the “Spring of the Nations” in Europe that resulted from the crisis of the 1840s, which called for the “social republic” or “social democracy,” that is, democracy adequate to the needs of society as a whole.

For the socialists of the time, the crisis of the 1840s and revolutions of 1848 demonstrated the need and pos-

sibility for getting beyond capitalism.

In late 1847, two young bohemian intellectuals, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, were commissioned by the Communist League to write a manifesto ahead of the potential revolutions that appeared on the horizon. Issued mere days ahead of the revolutions of 1848, the *Communist Manifesto* was a survey of the contradictory and paradoxical situation of modern society, its simultaneous radical possibilities and self-destructive tendencies in capitalism.

For Marx and Engels, as good followers of Hegel’s dialectic of history, the phenomenon of contradiction was the appearance of the possibility and necessity for change.

Marx and Engels could be confident of the apparent, manifest crisis of modern society and the need for radical change emerging in their time. They were not the originators of socialism or communism but rather tried to sum up the historical experience of the struggle for socialism in their time. They did not seek to tell the workers their interest in overcoming capitalism, but rather tried to help clarify the workers’ own consciousness of their historical situation, the crisis of bourgeois society in capital.

What Marx and Engels recognized that perhaps distinguished them from other socialists, however, was the utterly unique character of the modern, post-Industrial Revolution working class. What made the modern working class, or “industrial proletariat” different was its subjection to mass unemployment. Marx and Engels understood this unemployment to be not a temporary, contingent phenomenon due to market fluctuations or technical innovations putting people out of work, but rather a permanent feature of modern society after the Industrial Revolution, in which preserving the value of capital was in conflict with the value of workers’ wages. Unlike Adam Smith in the pre-industrial era, who observed that higher wages and lower profits increased productivity in society as a whole, after the Industrial Revolution, increased productivity was not due to workers’ greater efficiency but rather that of machines. This meant, as the director of the Marxist Frankfurt Institute for Social Research Max Horkheimer put it, that “machines made not work but the workers superfluous.”

On a global scale, greater productivity increased not employment and wealth but rather *unemployment* and *impoverishment*, as capitalism destroyed traditional ways of life (for instance of the peasants) but failed to be able to provide meaningful productive employment and thus participation in society for all, as originally envisioned in the revolt of the Third Estate and promised in the bourgeois revolution against the hierarchy of the *ancien régime*. The promise of the modern city is mocked by the mushrooming of slum cities around the world. The old world has been destroyed but the new one is hardly better. The promise of freedom is cruelly exploited, but its hope dashed.

Marxists were the first, and have the remained the

most consistent in recognizing the nature and character of this contradiction of modern society.

The difference between Marx’s time and ours is not in the essential problem of society, its self-contradictory form of value between wages and capital, but rather in the social and political conflicts, which no longer take the form primarily, as in Marx’s time, of the “class struggle” between workers and capitalists. “Class” has become a passive, objective category, rather than an active, subjective one, as it had been in Marx’s day and in the time of historical Marxism. What Marxists once meant by “class consciousness” is no more.

This lends a certain melancholy to the experience of “class” today. Privilege and disadvantage alike seem arbitrary and accidental, not an expression of the supposed worth of people’s roles in society but only of their luck, good or bad fortune. It becomes impossible to derive a politics from class position, and so other politics take its place. Conflicts of culture, ethnicity and religion replace the struggle over capitalism. Impoverished workers attack not orders whose privileges are dubious in the extreme, but rather each other in communal hatred. Consciousness of common class situation seems completely obscured and erased.

Not as Marx foresaw, workers with nothing to lose but their chains, but the unemployed masses wield their chains as weapons against each other. Meanwhile, in the background, underlying and overarching everything, capitalism continues. But it is no longer recognized. This is not surprising, however, since proper recognition of the problem could only come from practically engaging it as such. The issue is why it seems so undesirable to do so, today. Why have people stopped struggling for socialism?

We hear that we are in the midst of a deepening economic and social crisis, the greatest since the Great Depression of the early 20th century. But we do not see a political crisis of the same order of magnitude. It is not, as in the 1930s, when communism and fascism challenged capitalism from the Left and the Right, forcing massive social reform and political change.

This is because the idea of socialism—the idea of society being true to itself—has been disenchanted. With it has gone the class struggle of the workers against the capitalists that sought to realize the promise of freedom in modern society. It has been replaced with competing notions of social justice that borrow from ancient values. But since the sources of such ancient values, for instance religions, are in conflict, this struggle for justice points not to the transformation of society as a whole, but rather its devolution into competing values of different “cultures.” Today in the U.S., it seems to matter more whether one lives in a “red or blue state,” or what one’s “race, gender, and sexuality” are, than if one is a worker or a capitalist—whatever that might mean. Cultural affinities seem to matter more than socioeconomic interests, as the latter burn. People cling to their chains, as the only things that they know. **IP**

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discussion, bringing a spirit of resistance into existence. But Occupy also couldn’t get beyond the confines of capitalist society to imagine another way the world could be and how you could get from here to there. This idea of taking on and actually defeating and dismantling the repressive apparatus of this capitalist, imperialist state structure and putting into being an entirely different state structure, a new economic system that actually meets people’s needs, a new social system that uproots all of the oppressive relations of the past, and a new way of thinking to go along with those new social and economic relations, is something that people have either decided is not possible, is too daunting a question to even think about, or cannot even imagine. We think that is the central problem, and that people need to grapple with that and either answer in the affirmative that capitalist is the best you can do and stop pretending to be leftists and revolutionaries, or grapple with how you could actually deal with this. Any approach that leaves this state structure in existence is going to leave what it enforces upon people all around the world, from massive starvation to wars of empire to women being trafficked as sexual slaves in horrific numbers, and everything else.

ER: In certain respects, sections of the Occupy movement saw themselves as addressing that very largest concern. So I want to read a quote from Avakian’s article on the Occupy movement, called “Reflection on the Occupy movement: An Inspiring Beginning and the Need to Go Further.” He says, “Occupy contributes in significant ways to an atmosphere in which people are raising and wrangling with big questions about the state of society and the world, and whether and how something much better can be brought into being.” He adds: “It will be a very good thing if these protests continue to spread and further develop.”¹ This sentiment was widely shared on the Left when this was written back in November 2011. And in conversation with Cornel West, you stated, “This Occupy movement points to the potential to bring forward and seize a different future for our youth... this creates a new situation.”² Now that Occupy seems to be petering out rather than spreading further and developing, how has the situation changed?

CD: We in the RCP still think Occupy was very important. The impact that Occupy had on the atmosphere of 2011 was that it changed the terms of discussion. Capitalism became something to critique, not something to fetishize. It even extended the Democratic Party, where some party members wanted to raise some criticisms of capitalism, mostly trying to co-opt the Occupy movement. But even that reflected the impact of Occupy and also the spirit of resistance, because even people who didn’t come anywhere near Occupy felt its force.

We think that there are still real and important contributions that the suppression of Occupy has not yet been able to obliterate. But we also felt at the time, and still feel, that what needed to be grappled with very broadly was where the inequality that Occupy focused on actually came from: it wasn’t just from the greed of the people on top, but the actual system that they preside over, the very way that it worked. First off, you have to view

that inequality as more than a national phenomenon. It was not enough to say, “Let’s end inequality in the US,” because, for one, you couldn’t do that short of making revolution, but even if you did, were you going to leave aside the inequality on a global scale that imperialism creates? What would it take to do that?

So we still feel that Occupy was a very important experience, that its (mostly positive) impact is still felt. But there are some questions that have to be grappled with about how to go from that questioning of inequality and other sharp problems that humanity faces today to getting at the source of those problems and what’s needed to get rid of them once and for all, both in terms of revolution and how you would go about making revolution in a country like this.

ER: In your view, what is required to transform periodic resistance movements into a possible new beginning for democratic politics and Marxism?

CD: This relates to the idea of fighting the power and transforming people for revolution. Let me give you an example from the work we’ve been doing around mass incarceration here in New York that’s centered on the stop-and-frisk policy of the NYPD. We identified mass incarceration as the key way that the oppression of, particularly, black and Latino people in the United States comes down. If this is not taken on and beaten back, it amounts to what is a slow genocide against those peoples, and it is very important to build resistance around that. We set out to call forth and organize that kind of resistance, but also, to do it as revolutionaries and communists. That didn’t mean that people had to endorse revolution and communism to stand up and oppose stop-and-frisk with us.

So as we resist with people, we bring to them an understanding of where the problem that we are resisting comes from. We think that’s a crucially important part, because we don’t think that people’s thinking develops in a hot-house apart from actually standing up and resisting, which is part of the importance of Occupy. A lot of people go from an acceptance of this society and looking for their role in it to beginning to question it. That is the process that we want to take people through on as large a scale as possible. **IP**

¹ Bob Avakian, “A Reflection on The “Occupy” Movement: An Inspiring Beginning... And the Need to Go Further,” *Revolution* 250 (November 13, 2011). Available online at <http://revcom.us/a/250/avakian_on_the_occupy_movement-en.html>.

² “Racism, Inequality and Student Activism,” a conversation between Carl Dix and Cornel West held at Berkeley, December 2, 2011, video of which is available online at <<http://c-spanvideo.org/appearance/601096122>>.

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coln was not himself an abolitionist, but he responded to them. On the night side, of course, there was the suspending of *habeus corpus* and a lot of other things during Lincoln’s administration. But I think it is understandable that Lincoln looms large. What is fascinating to me is that 150 years later we have not generated a leader that most Americans would in any way compare with Lincoln.

WL: This October, *Fischer v. University of Texas* came before the Supreme Court, a case about affirmative action. The statistics for black educational attainment and black poverty in Texas are appalling both in themselves and in comparison with the rest of the nation, and yet we have entered into a world in which attempts to remedy this fact play out entirely in terms of diversity, rather than, say, economic justice. How did we get into this place? Is it desirable? How do you see our way out if it isn’t?

CW: I think you hit the nail on the head. You can see how far we have moved to the right—by right, I mean relative indifference to the injustice visited on poor people, especially poor people of color—now that diversity has become the justification for any serious affirmative action policy in our colleges and universities rather than justice. Diversity, of course, is very fragile. It is the last straw, the last reed, right? Now that the Supreme Court has taken up this case, there is a good chance that that last straw and that last reed will be destroyed, and we will lose affirmative action and find ourselves going backward. We saw this in the 1870s, 80s, and 90s in the Jim Crow response to Reconstruction. Here we see it again. It shows the degree to which our ruling classes at the top, our oligarchs and our plutocrats are so organized and so mobile. They are much more concerned about their own interests than they are about the public interest. They cannot project a long term vision of access to quality education for everyone including poor people in order to strengthen our democracy. Once we lose that we are in even more dire straits.

SL: You were quite active in the Occupy movement and spoke at a number of different occupations. What was your sense of the Occupy movement when it began? I mean, everyone was waiting for a response to the crisis, but how did you view the political form it took? How do you think the election year, the coming election, played into the demobilization of Occupy? And is there any legacy of it, or did Occupy fail to produce any lasting effect?

CW: It was a magnificent emergence. We saw different voices and different groups emerge and put their bodies on the line. Hundreds, even thousands of us went to jail. It was a wake up call accenting corporate greed and wealth inequality. Certainly, it had impact on the public conversation. But it was the emergence not so much of a movement—because that requires something very organizationally grounded and sophisticated—but of a social motion and momentum. There was a variety of different voices and people in that motion and momentum: anarchists, liberals, progressives, Marxists, anti-poverty activists, feminist, anti-homophobic, anti-

An interview Luis J. Rodriguez

Spencer A. Leonard and Edward Remus

On September 11, 2012, the radio program Radical Minds on WHPK (88.5 FM) broadcast an interview with Luis J. Rodriguez. The interview was conducted by Edward Remus and Spencer A. Leonard of the Platypus Affiliated Society. Rodriguez has forty years of experience as an organizer among diverse communities and is the author of 15 books. He co-founded the Network for Revolutionary Change in October of 2011, and in July of 2012 he joined the Justice Party's 2012 presidential campaign as Rocky Anderson's running mate. What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.

Edward Remus: What led to you to become the vice presidential candidate of the Justice Party? What do you intend to achieve by running for President this year, given that it is virtually impossible for you to win?

Luis J. Rodriguez: To me it was clear that someone had to speak on the issues that neither the Republicans nor Democrats are willing to talk about. It's a rigged game: It takes many millions of dollars for someone to run on the two-party ticket. Plenty of people who have experience in politics and something to say cannot become involved. We want to speak about why the game is rigged, who's behind it, and what we—the whole American populace—can do to make this a more democratic process. As things stand, it is all about money and not about the issues.

ER: What issues are central to the Justice Party's platform? How would you contrast the Justice Party with the Republicans, Democrats, and Greens?

LR: One of the things that attracted me to the Justice Party was a desire for economic justice: real jobs, the end of poverty, no more tax cuts to the wealthy, compassionate and rational immigration for immigrants, free education for everyone—that kind of thing. Then there's environmental justice: How can we cut back on the various toxic things we do to the environment? Finally, there is social and civic justice, which would entail Medicare for everyone, rather than a convoluted health-care plan; marriage equality; and no more discrimination based on race, gender, or sexual orientation. That also includes the ending of patriarchy, which is undemocratic, and needs to be challenged everywhere. But I don't think any of this is about competing with the Green Party or any other third party. There are close to 200 presidential candidates around the country. Most of them won't be on the ballot. There are so many people who just want to be heard. I support any such efforts. When Rocky Anderson invited me to join the Justice Party as his vice-presidential candidate, I accepted it—not thinking of myself as a politician, not thinking that I want to win, but from the viewpoint that we all need stronger, clearer ways to raise awareness of what's going on in this country and where we need to go.

ER: You are running on the principle that President Obama is worth defeating in November, but the only candidate who has a prospect of defeating Obama is Republican nominee Mitt Romney. What would be the effects of a Romney victory? Do you think it would at least have the virtue of registering the President's grave shortcomings?

LR: It is not really about Obama as a person, but much more fundamentally about our two-party system, which means you just have two ends of the same stick, and most Americans' voices are excluded. Democrats and Republicans try to pin responsibility for the economy on each other, but we all know they both are getting big corporate money. It does not matter whether Democrats or Republicans are in office when the big banks and corporations have all the power.

ER: But how, if at all, would a Romney victory change the Justice Party strategy for 2014 and 2016?

LR: Basically, no matter what, we need to keep organizing. If Romney wins, we keep organizing; if Obama wins, we keep organizing. I think the key question is the political maturity of activists and revolutionaries. We have to start thinking about how every one of these battles can be a living, teaching engagement for all Americans. The task now concerns the political maturity of individuals, raising awareness about the real issues and asking, Who is equipped to resolve them?

ER: You co-founded the Network for Revolutionary Change (NRC) in the fall of last year. On the NRC website, there is an article by Lenny Brody which says, "It is becoming clear that the mass movement and the struggles in the electoral arena are growing increasingly intertwined."¹ Have you adopted an orientation toward the Occupy movement? If so, have you been successful in channeling and redirecting the impulse behind Occupy into Justice Party electoral efforts?

LR: When the Occupy movement started in Zuccotti Park, I actually went there, and I felt that Occupy reflects the same struggles that motivate the Justice Party: The economy is completely derailed. The two mainstream parties aren't working. The political process is completely closed off. I look at all of these movements as expressions of the same impulses: How are we going to achieve a truly democratic, free, and less impoverished world? I see Occupy as another new wave of ideas about what we can do to involve more people politically. One of the key things to ask with respect to something like Occupy is, What new forms of struggle and organizing are emerging? It is not going to follow the old forms.

ER: In another statement, the NRC claims that, "revolutionaries always fight for immediate demands that can improve the conditions of the working class," adding that these struggles "are waged within the context of a larger revolutionary process."² However, as Occupy showed, many activists are reluctant to formulate demands. Why do you think the Occupy movement was reluctant to formulate specific demands, and what obstacles does this reluctance present for the Justice Party?

LR: I see this as a reaction to what has happened in the past. Almost every movement eventually gets co-opted. The peace movement eventually became the other side of the coin, the war movement, and they were both being used by the same people. The same goes for almost every major struggle. If you make it hard for people to articulate your demands for you, then it is hard for the Democratic Party or any other organization to come in and say, "We're the ones that are going to make it happen." At the same time, some very clear, concise, strategic direction has to come of this. A lot of it is already formulated in what the economy and the politics of the world are giving us. Where do we go from here? Where is society pushing us? The future destination is clearer; now it is a matter of how we tie the threads from the future into what's happening now.

Spencer A. Leonard: The Republicans are primarily running on the issue of the economy. President Obama, for his part, claims that his economic programs are a "difficult path" that is nonetheless capable of generating long-term economic recovery. How would the Justice Party be different? That is, does the Justice Party have a program or at least an approach that could genuinely affect the economic conditions people face today, both in terms of the immediate crisis as well as the background conditions that everyone now seems to take for granted—namely, endemic unemployment and underemployment, stagnant wages, etc.?

LR: Right now, the Justice Party is first and foremost addressing the issue of getting the corrupting influence of money out of politics. Part of what we can do is to have more voices involved in the answer. How do we resolve welfare reform? Get the welfare recipients right into the debate. What about the high rates of incarceration? Bring in the prisoners, the gang members, the mothers, and the families directly involved. That way, whatever solutions emerge will have more voices, more energy, and more experiences behind them, which you don't get when a few bureaucrats try to figure everything out. In the short term we want to open up the political process and call for justice in all parts of it. In the long term, I think we have to build a bigger and broader movement, which would involve Democrats and Republicans along with Green Party people and others, in order to really open up democracy in the economy and in politics.

SL: But what do you mean in terms of democratizing the economy? What is politically possible right now to address the fact that so many people have no prospects for work?

LR: We have to change the structure of the economy and politics in order to involve as many people as possible. There are lots of skills and much talent and imagination not being used. Even college kids struggle to get jobs. Meanwhile rich people's income has reached astronomical levels. Meeting the needs of the very poorest areas of the inner cities and the rural communities is going to require involving those communities in the political process.

ER: The NRC says that, for revolutionaries, the goal is for the working class to take political power. What do you envision with respect to politicizing the economy and the working class taking political power?

LR: For one thing, I am thinking about the large working class community I am managing in Los Santos, which is the second largest Mexican and Central American community in the whole country. It used to have a General Motors plant and a big foundry, but by the 1980s and '90s, all these jobs disappeared. My approach to this problem is bottom-up: Go to these communities and ask, How would you re-imagine your space? How would you redistribute the goods of the community? Even the Justice Party should not think of itself as the agent that makes things better directly; rather, it is a vehicle to open up the political process. We have to put power in the hands of the very people who have been pushed out of the economy. There is no immediate way in their community for them to be brought back in, because now everything moves to whatever area has the best infrastructure for advanced technology. The question is, How do we align this technology to the needs and capacities of the people?

ER: The NRC argues that the first step in the fight is to break with the Democratic Party, but also claims that the fight for a third party might be a prelude to the formation of a working class party. How would such a working class party hope to address these issues of job flight and unemployment? Beyond bottom-up participation from various communities, what would become politically possible if the Justice Party, or a working class party that emerges from it, were actually in a position to implement policy?

LR: I don't want to romanticize about a bunch of men and women who have oil and sweat on their brow, but

nonetheless the working class is really the fulcrum of the whole society. They are the class that can make a difference. Rich people are becoming richer and more powerful, demanding ever more totalitarian control. The middle class, being composed of people on their way up or down, is fluid; it is not a permanent, stable class. The one class that makes sense as a basis for politics, the only class that can move things forward, is the class of people who can survive only by selling their labor. Yet, many in this class are no longer able even to do that, because out on the streets there is no potential for jobs. How does that class get the knowledge, experience, and politicization necessary to help move things forward? If we don't confront that question, we leave things in the hands of rich people who maintain their power, year to year, and who really control this country regardless of who is President or which party has a majority in Congress.

SL: Many people who consider themselves leftists either vote for the Democrats or simply refuse to vote. What do you say to these people? Why are these two responses to American electoral democracy on the Left inadequate in 2012, specifically? Why the Justice Party, and why now?

LR: There has been a big shift in collective consciousness. I speak all over the country, and I often hear people saying really surprising stuff. They're talking about class, about their interests, about how the economy is not going to get fixed and how they don't feel involved in the Democratic or Republican parties. So you are seeing lots of fissures forming in the GOP and the Democrats, which is, I suppose, the first stages of things falling apart for them. Then you have the third parties. Some of them are more right-wing than left-wing, and vice versa. Really, the NRC is trying to bring together, as much as possible, those progressive revolutionary thinkers, activists, and leaders to start thinking about something that's never been done in this country: How do we go from here to there? How do we bring in all of this energy that's being generated around issues of the economy and focus it? Because right now, it's scattered, it's fragmented, sometimes it's at cross-purposes. We need to be involved at all levels of society, which means engaging with different parties, churches, labor unions, non-labor unions.

ER: If revolutionaries, such as those involved in the NRC, successfully come together in the way you are describing, what do you expect to happen?

LR: In general, I think revolutionaries of all stripes would become more imaginative. And that means that many of these various organizations would seem to lose momentum, only to come alive again: The way the organization used to be would begin to look like a corpse that we were dragging along, and it would become clear that we need a new vision and new ways of thinking. Part of the challenge for revolutionaries is to know how to let go of certain formations and ideas that moments ago might have been necessary, but now hold us down.

SL: There have been attempts to form a left-wing party at the level of electoral politics in America: the Labor Party in the 1980s and 1990s, various attempts in the 1970s, the Wallace campaign in 1948, the Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs, arguably even the Republican Party in 1860. How do you see the problem presented by the electoral system in the United States in light of this history? What lessons, if any, should we draw from these past attempts to influence politics at that level?

LR: To my mind, this is where the Left is at right now: It either stays small or goes big. I'm approaching 60 years old, and I don't have time to stay in a small group of like-minded people who aren't part of anything bigger. I'm calling for the Left and for revolutionary people—anybody out there—to be part of something big. Let's look at real strategies and, whether they involve new parties or old parties, ask, Where is it going? How can we orient them? How can we take them where they need to go? That, to me, is the essence of why the system is so hard to change: It keeps the people out of the process.

We can learn from the struggles to form a viable Labor Party in America. I think those past efforts were heroic, important, and meaningful. That they ultimately didn't lead to very much poses the question, What did we learn? I'm not sure if those lessons have been properly studied and absorbed. I can't tell you where the Justice Party's going to end up in a few years, but I can say that it is really working to build a movement more than an organization. That's what I'm interested in: a broader movement, involving more people, but without losing its revolutionary edge. More people are being pushed out, they are looking for answers, and we need to be there to fill that vacuum, putting forth real revolutionary thinking and ideals. You brought up the Green Party. I know Cheri Honkala very well, and I know Jill Stein's work. I support what they are trying to do. This is not competitive; it is about how we begin to address the scattered, fragmented ways that people organize now. How do we pull together the Occupy movement as well as all these third party movements? Where is it going to finally gel?

SL: On the one hand, we're in an environment where it has been over 20 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. China is essentially a capitalist country. The language of the Left is largely absent from culture or incomprehensible; today it is met with a kind of bemusement or even with open hostility. Occupy seemed interested in re-engagement with the question of democracy as such. How do you understand this re-engagement? Do you think this focus on democratic forms could facilitate a renewed involvement in the history of the Left, including a confrontation with the obstacles that the Left has struggled with in the past?

LR: In the past, many people saw the Soviet system and China as the beginnings of a new world. Now, almost all traces of that are simply gone or transformed completely. Their economies were based in the industrial system. Capitalism was the system best suited for that kind of world. When you look at technology today, it is putting forward the potential for something else: not industry, but the possibility of being connected in a way you never

were before, of being creative in ways that didn't exist before. There is the possibility that everyone could be their own source of labor and the site of their own great, inventive ideas. I think that's what is causing everything to change. Technology—the productive forces—are driving everything to be questioned, including the relations of production. How do we change our language to align with the real content of our times? This is a challenge for everybody. When you say certain things, people's eyes glaze over, because what you've said is expressive of an old way of thinking. But there are new seeds being planted for revolution. It's already in the ground. How do we nurture it? The Justice Party and the NRC alike are tools. They are vehicles that can help push things forward, by bringing in revolutionaries from all walks of life together to make a difference in this country.

ER: You co-founded the NRC in Chicago in October of 2011. Many of its founding members more or less split from the League of Revolutionaries for a New America (LRNA), a tendency led by Nelson Peery that was forged during the late 1960s and became part of the New Communist Movement. Given your apparent sympathy with the LRNA's theoretical emphasis on the epochal significance of industrial automation, what made this group of veterans, including yourself, decide to leave the LRNA?

LR: I think the LRNA has a very important role to play. I'm not opposing, and I wouldn't oppose, the NRC against any other Left formation, including the LRNA. The NRC, for its part, is trying to do something that nobody else is doing: pulling together real, objective, organized revolutionary activists and leaders, locally and across the country. I don't have any hostility toward the League, nor toward most Left or revolutionary thinking in general. I'd like to see people get more engaged, to have them see how both teaching and action are necessary for the struggle. I do not want to splinter people but actually get them moving as one, because we have to deal with capitalism at a systematic level.

ER: But discussions over strategy and tactics tend to come to a head within any leftist organization. What were some of the arguments and deliberations within the LRNA over the past two years with respect to the Justice Party and third-party electoral involvement?

LR: I don't think there was anything particular to the Justice Party; the LRNA was involved in the Labor Party and other third party formations, including the Green Party. Those weren't the issues. For me, it was about not being schizophrenic about revolution. I think everyone has fractured around either becoming activists or becoming teachers. I don't think we need to be divided that way. I've seen the Left isolate itself while right-wing groups—organized through churches and whatnot—begin to gather strength. The Left is becoming more fragmented, turning against itself. I say, let's not be schizophrenic, let's not break ourselves up. That's where the NRC can play a specific role. How do we bring the leaders around to a whole new orientation that we haven't had in this country, which has been rigged, politically, from the very beginning—from the anti-slavery battles to the labor battles? At the same time, people look at this country as having led some of the major labor struggles, from May Day to Civil Rights. Now we have to do it again. Where can we get together and become fully aligned, moving together, to make that happen?

SL: What do you see as the tasks of the 21st century, given that so many people look back nostalgically to the 20th century and, in particular, given that so many working and poor people, rightly or wrongly, look back to the welfare state as a model? You call for unity in the face of our present tasks, but is it really so clear what the political tasks of the present actually are, especially when the labor movement seems to be so politically weak? How do you address a context in which people are actively looking back to the past and how do you see the Justice Party candidacy, and your work, in terms of trying to turn a corner politically in this country?

LR: We're at the end of something and everybody feels it. As you come to the end of a certain period, everything frays. Things become fragmented and confused. But it's not the end of the world. It's the end of a certain epoch, but also the beginning of something new. For as long as human beings have been (as it is called) "civilized" there has always been one class, one group of people, with power over another. We're getting to a point where the imagination of "no more exploiters, no more oppressors" is becoming part of the consciousness of most people. There's something already happening in reality that's pushing us in that direction. To address that, we have to start looking at new ways of doing things, new organizations, and a new language even. I don't think it is about returning to Marx and Engels any more than it is about creating the new Engels and the new Marx for our time. Without turning away from what they gave us, we need to figure out how to become real, engaged, meaningful revolutionaries for *this* time. Imagination is key. Imagination is not fantasy; it is dictated by what happens in reality, and reality is showing us the possibilities of a world in which we don't need a new formation of the capitalist class, we don't need another group of wealthy people and politicians controlling what we do, we don't need people sitting in offices deciding the fate of the people on welfare. We have to put political power back into the hands of the people who work and the people who have lost their jobs. You have to align with the future. The things being done by the Republicans and Democrats are old, and they aren't going to work. They speak in terms of the period that's drawing to a close. They aren't going anywhere. We're stuck on this treadmill but there's a whole new track opening up. How do we get on that new track instead of running in the same place, over and over again? **IP**

Transcribed with the assistance of Miguel Rodriguez

1. Lenny Brody, "Strategy and Tactics for Revolutionaries," *Revolutionary Network: Official Newsletter of the Network for Revolutionary Change* 2 (June–July 2012): 8. Available online at <http://networkforrevolutionarychange.org/documents.html>.

2. Ibid.